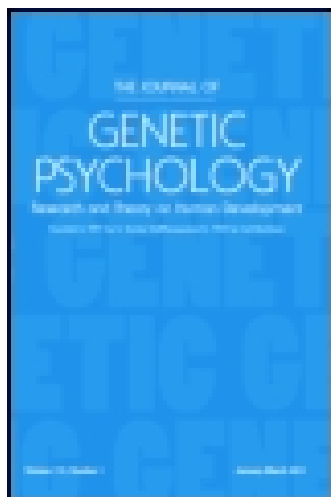


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THE PROBLEM OF JEWISH EDUCATION

By A. MILLNER

It gives me great pleasure to have the privilege to speak to you this evening as the Principal of the School now being dedicated by you. The problem of Hebrew education, is intrinsically connected with the higher problem of Israel's existence among the nations. The inter-relation and interdependence between the two problems is so great that to deal with one makes it hard not to deal with the other also. I may, therefore, be allowed to sketch first with a few words, the problem of Israel's existence and subsequently touch upon the problem of Jewish education.

A Greek legend tells us that there was an island in the Mediterranean which was inhabited by nymphs or sirens, endowed with voices so sweet and enchanting that all the mariners passing that island and coming under the spell of their bewitching tunes were charmed out of their senses and so they let their vessels founder on the nearby rocks or hurled themselves into the briny deep of the Midland Sea. When, however, Ulysses, the greatest adventurer of Greek mythology, in his wanderings through the Mediterranean came across that fatal island, he stopped up the ears of his companions with wax and tied himself fast to the mast of his vessel so as to escape destruction from the luring singers.

A different method to withstand the charms exercised by the sirens on their hearers was, the myth tells us, employed by Orpheus. When he, in company of the Argonauts passed that ill-famed island the nymphs, as usual, began to sing. But Orpheus, himself an unsurpassed singer, produced such a melodious song as to quell, or break the spell caused by the seductive airs of the sirens.

This Greek myth, my friends, illustrates to perfection, all the possible solutions of the problem of Israel's existence in the Diaspora, or Goluth. After the destruction of the Jewish state, when Israel was scattered over all the lands known in antiquity, the greatest problem that ever confronted a people came up for us Jews:—How shall Israel, disunited and scattered, preserve its identity? How shall it live on under conditions which have always brought about the complete extinction of any other tribe or race? Or let us formulate the problem

thus: How shall Israel listen for centuries to the siren voice of the nations: "Come ye and amalgamate with us, and yet resist their luring call with the greatest of tenacity." One simple solution of the problem is that reached by our morally weak Jews of all generations. It is they who, not having the moral power to resist, yield, not unlike the seafarers of the Greek legend, to the siren voice, and merge their tribal identity into the ocean of humanity, thus cutting themselves adrift from Israel forever.

Happily, such weak Jews have always formed among us a negligible quantity. Another simple and yet most efficacious solution of the problem was that reached by our ancestors of old, whose watchword became, "Make a Hedge around the Law." Form a wall around the life of the Jew so as to make him impervious to influences from without." Their method was exactly the method employed by the mythical Ulysses. They stopped their ears to the siren voice of the nations, and so the Ghetto came into existence, first the spiritual Ghetto was initiated, and soon after followed the Ghetto real and proper. Tortoise-like the Jew built a scaly case around his being and tortoise-like he braved with his shielding shell centuries and ages. Were this the only merit of the Ghetto its existence would have been by it alone, fully and amply justified. This Ulysses way of guarding oneself against destruction-spelling influences was, if not the direct result of, yet quite congruous with, the general spirit that swayed the nations of antiquity and the Middle Ages down to our modern time.

But a change came over the spirit of the nations of Western Europe, which initiated a new era for mankind, and every country that became imbued with the spirit of that era has seen the medieval Ghettos crumble and fall. The old fence guarding Judaism against disintegration fell down in many countries, and Jewish sons and daughters are themselves great votaries of the new spirit.

Unhappily—or one may perhaps paradoxically say happily—the bulk of the Russian and other Eastern European countries is still clinging to the old way of preserving Judaism. They are kept *volens volens* in the Ghetto. But how long, and the old Ghetto life will be no more!" There are many portents and signs that the time honored way of preserving Judaism is no more holding its own, even in darkest Russia.

And what about conditions among the two million Jews in this land of God? It is well known to you what a serious aspect the problem of perpetuating Judaism in this country bears. It looks as if Israel were soon to give up its long struggle against amalgamation, say many pessimists. Israel is too much enticed by the all powerful spirit of our modern

age to which it has free access, to withstand amalgamation for a long time.

Indeed, never in its long history has Israel been so much exposed to the luring call of the sirens. What shall modern Judaism do in order to live on? Back to the old time Ghetto? Impossible! The latter is gone in modern countries for good.

My friends, there is a third way to solve the problem of our existence. If we are not willed to merge our identity into the nations of the globe, and if time and circumstances make it impossible for us to live penned off in spiritual and real Ghettos, then let us adopt the method of Orpheus, let us make our Judaism produce such a charm as to offset the charm exercised on us so strongly by the Gentile world. And indeed our Judaism has stamina enough to withstand all the alluring powers in the world. But the kernel, the living forces of Judaism are hidden from the majority of our present generation. What they see of it is mostly incidental and unattractive. The reform wing of Judaism has essayed to meet this disadvantage. But in its zeal to emulate the nations in the charm and attractiveness of the formal side of things, it has cut away many a vital part of historical Judaism, so that if all Jews assumed the aspect of reform Judaism, their fate as a people would soon be sealed.

Such radical measures we can hardly compare to the life preserving method of Orpheus. Theirs is rather the method of Mitath N'shikah the lulling of Israel into the eternal sleep with a kiss by hobnobbing with and groveling before other cults. The real Orpheus method to be applied by modern Jews must indeed consist in making Judaism attractive in form no less than it is in content, in freeing it from many a vestige of the Ghetto, but also in preserving what is vital in historical Judaism, and withal, in making the latter a living force constantly reacting upon and influencing our lives.

One of the great reforms necessary and imperative within conservative Judaism concerns the Hebrew school. The old-time Hebrew school, commonly called Chedar, was once undoubtedly a great power and productive of much good in Israel. But it was a product of the Ghetto, and as such only in keeping with the general Ghetto life. Both the Ghetto and the Chedar looked unattractive.

With the Ghetto gone, the Chedar has become an anachronism. Modern Judaism can hardly work any good whatever with the systemless Chedar. Not alone our labor, but what is more precious, our Judaism, would be lost on it. What we need to-day is modern schools conducted along the same lines as the great public schools of the country. Some people of the Jewish population of this city seem to have fully realized

the great need of such a modern Hebrew school, in that great pecuniary sacrifices and obstacles of a much stronger nature connected with the building of such a beautiful and up-to-date school as the one now being dedicated by us, did not deter them from having it erected. They may hope that the fruit of their noble endeavor will be great and productive of much good for the entire Jewish population of this city.

But here I cannot but sound a note of warning to the future patronizers of the school. Lack of system of the old time Chedar, and its general unattractiveness have resulted in the lack of respect on the part of our own people for Hebrew schools, Hebrew tuition, and Hebrew teachers, though the latter may be modern. Let the Jewish population of this city realize that the future success of the school will largely depend on their higher mental attitude toward it. Our youth will never respect the Hebrew school and its teachers to the same extent as they respect the public school and its teachers, and consequently will profit less by its attendance unless they are impressed at home with a more adequate idea of its importance and high standing.

We must in short, to use a Talmudical phrase, implant the beauty, the order, the system of Japhet into the tents of Israel. When we look at the ways and various institutions of Christendom, what harmony, what order, what sense of propriety is suffused over all of them. It is the perception of this as contrasted with the somewhat ghettoish aspect of our orthodox schools, institutions and synagogues, that tends so much to estrange American born and bred Jewish youths and maidens from their ancestral faith. We conservative Jews must meet this our disadvantage, or we shall constantly be losing ground.

So much for the formal side of the school. I may also be allowed to say a few words concerning the curriculum to be followed in it, which to be sure, must form its primary object.

Boys and girls attending this school and desirous to pass its entire course will have to attend it for seven years. They will be put through several classes. Starting from the rudiments of the Hebrew language, they will advance to the study of the Pentateuch, the Prophets, the famous Commentator Rashi and other subjects of Hebrew literature. It will be the endeavor of the teachers to make them grasp the greatness of our primeval classics, to show them, if only in a desultory way, what store of pearls is scattered among the seemingly chaotic and conglomerate mass of Talmudic and rabbinic literature, to thrill their hearts with the woeful facts of our singular history, and withal, to inspire them with the truth that ancient Judaism was the bed rock out of which

the eternal verities and values of mankind were hewn. All this must have the ultimate end to keep them within the fold, that they may withstand the luring call of the sirens the more tenaciously the greater their allurements become.

And since it is not the so-called Christians who spell great danger through allurements to Judaism—except perhaps through brutal force they may employ to win us away from our ancestral faith, as in the case of Spain and Russia—but rather the good and noble and true and righteous in Christendom; the more, therefore, Christian nations at large advance, the more they soak the essence of Christianity into their lives, the harder must it then be for us to resist their allurements and their tacit reproach: “What for your particular existence, Jews? Your special mission is done. But the genius of Judaism speaks to the genius of its daughter religion.” Granted the special mission of Israel is done, but Israel is willed to live as nature is willed to continue its laws. Let them lead their particular existence. They will grow with the nations, advance with the nations, contribute their share to every spiritual domain of the nations. But as long as tribe speaks of tribe and nation speaks of nation, and as long as the ideals of Moses and the prophets are not verified among mankind to the very letter, so long will there be the people of Israel witnessing the continuously increasing light which its prophets once lit in ancient Judea.